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Narrative Interview and Documentary Interpretation*

1. Introduction

Over the past few years, qualitative methods have developed into recognised techniques for acquiring and evaluating data in empirical social research. To a certain extent, the conflicting natures and the distinctness of their different approaches have helped to define their foundations, outlines and areas of practical application. On the other hand, there has been a tendency in recent years to combine different and sometimes even contrary qualitative methods. Without wanting to elaborate on the discussion about method triangulation, which goes as far as to suggest the integration of quantitative and qualitative techniques, I would like to consider in this article how the Documentary Method can be used to interpret narrative interviews.

However, before different approaches of empirical social research can be successfully combined, I believe that it is necessary not only to work on the practical coexistence of two different research methods but also (and first of all) to identify the methodological similarities and differences between the two methods (cf. Maschke/Schittenhelm, 2005). After all, if the main quality feature of the predominant techniques in qualitative social research – their methodological foundation – is to be maintained, it is necessary to use a methodologically reflective approach in combining different methods.

In this article I would like to attempt to combine the Documentary Method of data interpretation with an extremely popular method of data acquisition, the narrative interview. In order to do justice to the methodological differences and similarities between these two methods, I would first of all like to briefly explain the approach and significance of the narrative interview (Section 2), of which I will then provide a critical appraisal (Section 3) in preparation of introducing the Documentary Method. After briefly explaining the main features of the Documentary Method (Section 4), I will then illustrate how it can be used to interpret narrative interviews (Section 5).

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2. The Narrative Interview as a Method of Empirical Social Research

The narrative interview has become so important for qualitative empirical social research because it permits longer experiential periods or even complete biographies to be recorded sequentially from the interviewees' perspective. The purpose of the narrative interview is to allow respondents to speak off the cuff about a part of their everyday life that is of interest to the researchers, be it their entire life story or just their working life.

The narrative interview was developed in the 1970s by Fritz Schütze, originally in connection with a research project on municipal merging. Community politicians gave an account of the "chains of incidences" (Schütze, 1982: 579) they had experienced in conjunction with these municipal mergers. Later on, the narrative interview was also used to record biographical accounts, which revealed chains of personal experiences similar to those revealed in the initial interviews that had focussed on profession and politics. In the period that followed, Schütze presented several biographical analyses on very different types of people – a miller (Schütze, 1991), a soldier (1992) and students (1994, 2001).

When reconstructing his narrative interviews, Schütze identified process structures that were typical of these accounts. These *process structures of the life course* (Schütze, 1983b), which analysis reveals to be the conjunction between "the biographical subject's explanatory models and interpretations" and "their reconstructed biography" (ibid: 284), are present in different combinations in many impromptu biographical narratives. As process structures they cannot be reduced to the 'objective' course of life or its 'subjective' experience but act as mediators between the objectivity and subjectivity of the life stories. Schütze distinguishes between four process structures, or "four fundamental types of attitudes towards biographical experiences":

"1. Biographical action schemes

The biographical subject can plan these schemes, and the sequence of experiences thus consists of the successful or failed attempt to put them into practice.

2. Institutional sequence patterns of the biography

The biographical subject and their interaction partners or opponents can expect these patterns as part of an expected social or organisational schedule, and the sequence of experiences thus consists of the punctual, accelerated, delayed, impeded or failed progression of the individual steps expected.

3. Biographical trajectories of suffering

Biographical events may be overwhelming for the biographical subject. Initially they can only react to them 'conditionally', struggling to regain an albeit frail state of balance in the way they live their everyday life.

4. Transformative processes

Finally, as is the case with action schemes, relevant biographical events can stem from the biographical subject's 'inner world'; in contrast to action schemes, however, they develop unexpectedly and are experienced by the biographical subject as a systematic transformation in their options of action and experience" (1984: 92).

In contrast to the trajectory of suffering, which is set off by external conditions, the transformative process has its roots in the biographical subject's "inner world" (Schütze, 1984: 94). From the action scheme, the transformative process differs in that it cannot be brought about intentionally but implies a "constant process of going through situations in which new things are experienced" and a "permanent discrepancy between the planning of activities and the putting them into practice" (ibid: 93).

3. The Narrative Interview Between Single Case Analysis and Case Comparison

For reasons of space, the method of analysis developed by Fritz Schütze to interpret narrative interviews cannot be presented here in detail. Schütze's main objective is to interpret those parts of the interview structured by the narrative genre¹ in such a way that the process structures of the individual life course become visible (cf., *inter alia*, Schütze, 1983a; Riemann, 1987).

My main concern in the following will be the question of how, in the interpretation of narrative interviews, the process structures as such have been reconstructed, abstracted and made into theoretically relevant formal categories. As we will see, Schütze makes more use of single case analysis than of case comparison in his attempts to come upon such process structures.

In the series of essays on the narrative interview written by Schütze between 1976 and 2001, he develops "formal" as well as "substantial" theories and categories – to use the same distinction as Glaser/Strauss (1969), which Schütze also frequently refers to. In these works, Schütze takes the unusual path of using the process structures of the biographies of his subjects to develop the formal categories first (cf. Schütze, 1976, 1983a and b, 1984, 1987), followed by substantial theories and categories – for example on transformative processes in times of war (cf. Schütze, 1989) or on the "wild" transformation of a student (cf. Schütze, 1994).

It is not possible to comment on how the formal categories, i.e. the biographical process structures, were originally developed because Schütze does not include the cases he analysed in his essays. However, it is possible to identify his strategic approach both from his representations of the development of substantial theories and from the statements on his methodology.

1 I will be elaborating on the distinction between various text genres – a very important aspect also in documentary interpretation – in Section 5.

In Schütze's work, the analysis begins with a single case, i.e. a narrative interview in which the "sequential layers of major and minor process structures that are sequential in themselves" (1983b: 284) is reconstructed. By using this method, Schütze looks for the general within the particular in each case. As Schütze puts it, "since these are precise, in-depth text analyses, (...) general features and fundamental mechanisms of social and biographical processes can be hypothetically recorded in a single case" (1991: 207). His aim is thus to "analytically identify general situational and process features (...) from the singularity of the events under examination" (ibid: 208). He also describes this 'hypothetical ascertaining of data' (see also Schütze, 1987: 248) as "analytical abstraction" (Schütze, 1989: 39, 1984: 114).

According to Schütze, "detaching oneself from the single case analysis of the singular interview and making contrastive comparisons of different interview texts" should always follow "analytical abstraction", with which, incidentally, the "overall formation" of a biography (in terms of the layers of process structures) can be identified (1983b: 287). The main purpose of comparative analysis is therefore to confirm, review and distinguish between newly developed categories and their internal relationships (cf. Schütze, 1987: 248). In this context, Schütze looks for minimal and maximal contrasts in order to consolidate the already established categories and their internal relationships as well as compare them with other categories and their internal relationships. This approach is used in Schütze's examination of the experiences of American and German participants of war (cf. Schütze, 1989) and in his research work on the life of a miller (cf. Schütze, 1991). On the basis of this case comparison, Schütze then arrives at an "in-depth analytical abstraction" (1989: 71) of the individual cases and finally at a "tentative theoretical model" (ibid). The research work ends as soon as the theoretical model and the categories are "saturated" and no more new aspects can be found (1983b: 293).

While this form of case comparison within a subject area (e.g. the experiences of millers or participants of war) aims at the development of a substantial theory, Schütze outlines in one of his early texts the generation of a formal category as defined by Glaser/Strauss (1969). If the objective is to "identify elementary biographical process structures", for instance the biographical trajectory of suffering (Schütze, 1983b: 292), the comparative analysis of a field of experience (e.g. primary socialisation in boarding schools) should be followed by "the examination of an autobiography dominantly characterised by suffering with a completely different central field of experience (e.g. emigration, becoming unemployed, etc.)" (ibid).

Schütze bases these considerations about the generation of substantial and formal categories in particular and about his research strategy in general (cf. particularly Schütze, 1984: 115, FN 1) on the Grounded Theory by Glaser/Strauss (1969), but in my opinion only takes their approach into ac-

count to a certain extent. Particularly the priority Schütze gives to single case analysis is inconsistent with Glaser/Strauss, who prefer theory construction to a precise and detailed single case analysis (cf. 1969: 30). This difference, which is only seemingly limited to the results of qualitative research (case analysis vs. theory construction), has important implications. In order to identify these implications, I would like to take a brief look at Glaser/Strauss' Grounded Theory.

Glaser/Strauss are sceptical towards the hypothetical ascertainability of the general within the particular of a single case and thus also towards analytical abstraction based on single case analysis (cf., *inter alia*, 1969: 55, FN 11). For this reason, they construct comparative analysis, beyond case comparison, as a "constant comparative method" (ibid: 101) that ranges from the initial interpretation to the comparison of at times seemingly incomparable subject areas (cf. ibid: 54 f). During comparative analysis, categories, their features and their relationships not only undergo a process of consolidation, examination and differentiation – as is the case in Schütze's work – but are actually developed (cf. ibid: 36 f) as well.

In contrast, Schütze insists on the "hypothetical" ascertainability of important categories on the basis of a single case; above all its biographical process structures, i.e. its central formal categories, can in fact, he claims, be identified in one single case, although they may have been tried and differentiated in numerous comparable cases.

As already implied, however, there are parallels between Glaser/Strauss (1969) and Schütze's work regarding the nature of the theoretical models that are to result from research. At the core of these models is the development of (formal or substantial) categories, of characteristics of these categories and, finally, of hypotheses on relations between these characteristics or categories. Particularly the formal categories of the biographical trajectory and of the transformative process have – in terms of their core characteristics and their relations – been elaborated with such precision that Schütze sometimes even identifies phase sequences (e.g. within biographical trajectories).

As part of this process, Schütze – similarly to Glaser/Strauss – points out a category for each phenomenon (e.g. for each section of a narrated biography) and, insofar as possible, its characteristics. In the context of an individual biography, Schütze then also reconstructs the relationships between the individual categories, for example between biographical trajectories and transformative processes in a student (cf. Schütze, 1994). Again, it becomes clear that the priority Schütze gives to single case analysis tends to prevent the comparison of such relations between process structures *across* different biographies, and that a more extensive theory construction (as envisaged by Glaser/Strauss) is not possible in this field.

Precisely because of the priority given to the single case, the reference point of every interpretation in Schütze's work is mainly the (individual)

biography; in other words, Schütze reconstructs every utterance in a narrative interview in its biographical context, trying to identify the process structure that underlies an utterance first and foremost within the context of the research subject's biography or personality.

In my view, this one-dimensional interpretation of a phenomenon, which only refers to the biography, is a problem in methodological terms. However, it can also be found in Glaser/Strauss' Grounded Theory (1969), which seeks to empirically refine and expand the categories but reconstructs each specific combination of category characteristics in *one* case only, with the result that – as Nentwig-Gesemann (2007: 288) criticises – “each case is only allocated to one type”.

In contrast to Glaser/Strauss' Grounded Theory and to Schütze's approach, the Documentary Method aims at not only interpreting spoken data with regard to their functionality for *one* case or *one* (e.g. the biographical) dimension but at capturing its multidimensionality (which may include, but not exclusively, the biography recorded in the case at hand). To achieve this, however, it is necessary from the beginning of the interpretation process not to stick to a single case but to perform even the sequential analysis of spoken data as part of the comparative analysis.

4. The Main Features of the Documentary Method

Before elaborating on how the Documentary Method can be used to interpret narrative interviews, placing particular emphasis on the comparative analysis and, above all, on type formation, I would like to describe at least the main features of the Documentary Method (for details on this, cf.: Bohnsack, 2007a; Bohnsack/Nentwig-Gesemann/Nohl, 2007a). Following the sociologist Karl Mannheim, Ralf Bohnsack developed this method into a sophisticated technique of qualitative educational and social research in terms of both methodology and practicability.²

The Documentary Method shares with the narrative interview the conviction that what is communicated verbally and explicitly in interview texts is not the only element of significance to the empirical analysis, but that it is above all necessary to reconstruct the meaning that underlies and is implied

2 Fritz Schütze himself also sometimes resorts to the Documentary Method of interpretation. While one of Schütze's early publications only looks at and criticises the ethnomethodological version of the Documentary Method advocated by Garfinkel (1967) as a way of interpreting everyday life (cf. Schütze, 1976: 165ff), one of his more recent publications (cf. Schütze, 1993) proposes the Documentary Method as the suitable concept for case analysis to be accomplished by social workers. However, he does not take into account the significance the Documentary Method has by now given to comparative analysis and type formation.

with these utterances. While the actor or speaker is consciously aware of what he or she is doing – e.g. expressing a political belief, giving charity to someone in need, or saying “I love you” – this action or text also has a second level of meaning to which the actor does not necessarily have access. We experience this in everyday life in situations in which we recognise an action or text as the expression or proof of a particular attitude (e.g. a loyalist or laissez-faire attitude, a hypocritical personality in the charity-giving case, or strong faithfulness).

The Documentary Method distinguishes between these two levels of meaning by referring to the first level as that of the “intentional expressive meaning” and “objective meaning” and to the latter as that of the “documentary meaning”. The intentional expressive meaning designates what “was meant by the subject just as it appeared to him when his consciousness was focused upon it” (Mannheim, 1952: 46). The objective meaning, on the other hand, does not refer to the intentions of the actors but to the “objective social configuration” (ibid) that exists beyond the intentions and specific characteristics of the actors. When we classify a conclusion as a political statement, the sentence “I love you” as a declaration of love, or the act of giving money to a poor person as charity, we are resorting to general and, as it were, objective knowledge. We are filing facts according to their topic. In other words, we are working out WHAT a text or an action is about.

The documentary meaning gauges the action or text according to the process by which it came about, i.e. by its “modus operandi” (Bohnsack, 2007a: 255). By drawing on other actions or texts by the same actor, it sees the modus operandi “as proof” of a “synoptical appraisal” undertaken by the researcher which “may take his global orientation [in original: “habitus”; AMN] as a whole into its purview” (Mannheim, 1952: 52). The important point here is the way a text or action is constructed, or the limits within which its topic is dealt with, i.e. the “orientation framework” within which (Bohnsack, 2007a: 135) a problem is handled.

While in everyday life we intuitively resort to the practical level and simply demonstrate how to, for example, tie a knot, in science we must rely on finding ways of verbally explicating the process by which texts and actions come about, or their orientation frameworks. This is done by falling back on practice. In this practice, we have an “atheoretical” knowledge (Mannheim, 1997: 67) but are not required to pinpoint or explicate it in terms of common-sense theory.

This knowledge forms part of our routine, or, to use the same term as Bohnsack et al. (1995) with reference to Bourdieu, of our “habitual action”. While people may distance themselves from their habitual actions and try to explicate them, this is entirely unnecessary in the milieus we are familiar with because habitual action can involve not only individuals but whole groups. Only when we are forced to explain something to outsiders do we

attempt to convey the object of habitual action and atheoretical knowledge in common-sense terms.

Atheoretical knowledge thus connects people. After all, it is founded on common actions and experience. This is why, in this context, Mannheim (1997: 203) speaks of a “*conjunctive experience*”. Whenever we want to tell people who have not shared it about our own conjunctive experience, we have to explain its meaning in detail. Mannheim thus also refers to this as *communication* or *communicative knowledge* (ibid: 258). However, since our aim as researchers – particularly as researchers of biographies and culture – is to examine not only general knowledge that exists irrespective of the various groups and individuals of our society, we must rely to a considerable extent on the conjunctive knowledge that is closely linked with people’s specific practices in their biographies and milieus.

But how do I gain access to the documentary meaning of habitual action and atheoretical knowledge? In this respect, the Documentary Method takes the same path of sequential analysis that is also characteristic of Schütze’s method of analysis. However, in contrast to the latter approach, the Documentary Method involves a consistently *comparative* sequential analysis.

In his attempts to explain comparative sequential analysis, Bohnsack refers to George Herbert Mead’s interaction model: “If (in accordance with Mead) a gesture or utterance acquires its significance or meaning in the context of the other actors’ reactions, an (implicit) regularity is established in the relationship between (empirically observable) utterance and (empirically observable) reaction, which must then be made accessible or explicated” (Bohnsack, 2001: 335). The Documentary Method then assumes that the utterances that potentially follow an initial utterance are, in an atheoretical and habitualised form, available to the research subjects as knowledge. However, since the research subjects are unable to explicate the coherent follow-up utterances – particularly where a routine, or even new, practice is concerned – an empirical reconstruction and explication of the research subjects’ atheoretical knowledge is required, i.e. of the following and empirically identifiable actions that represent an adequate response to the initial action. The framework or orientation framework within which the topic or problem introduced in the initial utterance is attended to with the follow-up utterance is the orientation framework that spans the sequence.

It is important, however, to remember that possible, i.e. adequate, follow-up utterances can only be validly recorded if they can be differentiated from inadequate follow-up utterances. This happens by way of comparison with other cases in which similar topics are handled in different ways. For this reason, sequential analysis is always comparative in the Documentary Method (cf. Bohnsack/Nohl, 2007).

The way, or the orientation framework, in which a topic is handled in an interview is therefore best reconstructed if compared with other interview

texts that deal with the same topic but within contrasting orientation frameworks. For, if we only had *one* interview text to look at, we would interpret it against the background of our own (common-sense) theories on the respective topic only (e.g. first day at school). By comparing the sequences in the first interview (e.g. the experience of the first day at school) with the potentially very different experiences of a second and third interview, we no longer see the first interview against the background of our own common-sense theories only, but also against the background of other empirical cases. Our previous knowledge is not obliterated but is methodically relativised. “The Documentary Method therefore depends on the researcher’s position. (...) The better established and thus intersubjectively comprehensible and verifiable the researcher’s comparative horizons, the more methodically controllable the method becomes” (Bohnsack, 2007a: 137). This is why comparative analysis is the golden standard of methodically controlled research (cf. Nohl, 2007).

In research practice, the methodological considerations presented up to this point (documentary meaning, reference to conjunctive, atheoretical or practical knowledge, comparative sequential analysis, reconstruction of orientation frameworks, comparison) are reflected in three stages of documentary interpretation: the formulating interpretation, the reflecting interpretation, and type formation. I will explain these in more detail in the next section, making direct reference to the analysis of narrative interviews.

5. The Documentary Interpretation of Narrative Interviews

In this chapter I will introduce a method for interview analysis. While it follows the tradition of the Documentary Method, it takes up certain elements of the *analysis of narrative structures*, a method developed by Fritz Schütze.³

One of the most important features of the documentary interpretation of interviews is the clear-cut distinction it makes between the “formulating interpretation” on the one hand, which summarises topics, (5.1) and the “reflecting interpretation” of the framework of orientation on the other hand, in which topics are elaborated on (5.2). Secondly, the Documentary Method is based on a consistent comparative analysis that begins at the very outset of

³ The strategy presented here along with its methodological background builds on research experience gained in the course of a major research project (cf. Nohl, 2006, 2008) and on some of Bohnsack’s previous considerations (2007a: 65-6) on the narrative interview. Following this, the documentary interpretation of narrative interviews was developed further in a number of dissertation projects and, most importantly, in an international, interdisciplinary research project on the integration of highly qualified migrants into the labour market (cf. Nohl et al., 2006, see also Nohl/Ofner’s contribution to this volume and the working papers at www.cultural-capital.net.)

the interpretation process (5.3). Thirdly, the empirical results acquired by applying the Documentary Method are formulated as types – in particular as multidimensional, sociogenetic types (5.4).

5.1 The Formulating Interpretation of Interviews

The formulating interpretation of interviews begins even before their transcription. After the data has been collected, the researchers listen to the audiotapes of the interviews and note down in a table the chronological order of the topics in each individual case. These “*topical structures*” (Bohnsack, 2007a: 135) permit the topics that are most relevant to research to be identified prior to transcription.

There are three criteria that are relevant to the selection of topical segments: 1. Topics of interest are those the researchers decided on prior to empirical research. 2. Also of interest, of course, are the topics the interviewees talked about in much detail, passionately and/or metaphorically. It is important to pay attention to these “focusing metaphors” (cf. Bohnsack, 2003: 45), among other reasons, simply because they may serve as a corrective to the topics chosen by the researchers. 3. What is more, the topical structures can be an aid to identifying those topics that come up in several cases and thus lend themselves to comparative analysis.

Following transcription, a detailed formulating interpretation is prepared. This interpretation stage involves reviewing each interview segment sequentially to find more or less distinctive changes of topic. This way, principal topics and subtopics are identified. For every subtopic that covers one, two or even several interview lines, a summary is prepared in full sentences and expressed in the researchers’ own words.

This reformulation of the topical content of the interview in itself helps the researchers to establish or maintain a distance from the text (cf. Schäffer, 2006). They are made aware of the fact that the topical content of the interview is not self-evident but requires interpretation. This becomes most apparent when – as is often the case – the group of researchers or the research workshop start disputing about which detailed formulating interpretation is appropriate.

5.2 The Reflecting Interpretation of Interviews

While the formulating interpretation aims at establishing *what* the interview text is about, the reflecting interpretation is concerned with the *how*: how is a topic or the problem presented elaborated on, and in which framework of orientation is it dealt with? The question of the style or *modus operandi* in which a topic is developed refers equally to the formal and semantic aspects of interviews. The semantics of the text cannot be disassociated from its formal

structure, the documentary interpretation of interviews takes account of this. According to Schütze, narrative interviews should involve asking questions that encourage narration. If such questions achieve their aim, the interviews to be interpreted mainly consist of narratives that are, of course, linked with descriptions and argumentations. In order to identify whether a narrative interview actually includes narratives and where these narratives are to be found, the Documentary Method – as part of its formal interpretation process – takes up the differentiation of text genres developed in the context of Fritz Schütze’s narrative structure analysis. As regards semantics, it then resorts to its own means of comparative sequential analysis. Since the formal structure of the text also reveals something about the relevance of its semantic contents, I would like to look at the formal interpretation of interviews first (5.2.1) and then present the associated semantic interpretation of the Documentary Method (5.2.2).

5.2.1 Formal Interpretation and Differentiation of Text Genres

In the analysis of narrative interviews, Fritz Schütze distinguishes between narratives, descriptions and argumentations. In a narrative, the informant gives an account of actions and events that have a beginning and an end as well as a chronological sequence. Descriptions are generally characterised by the fact that the narrator gives an account of recurring courses of action or established facts (e.g. of a picture or machine). Argumentations are summaries of the motives, reasons and conditions behind one’s own or someone else’s actions based on common-sense theory (cf. Schütze, 1987: 148). Evaluations, which – deviating from Schütze’s approach – I would like to formulate separately, are evaluative statements about the interviewee’s own or someone else’s actions.

Fritz Schütze pointed out that impromptu narratives are a particularly true reflection of the narrator’s experience. Precisely because the narrator must complete (give a shape to), condense and detail what he or she narrates – i.e. because he or she becomes impelled to fulfil certain narrative obligations⁴ – he or she becomes entangled in his/her own experiences and there-

⁴ There are three different obligations a narrator has to fulfil. 1. The *obligation to detail* impels the narrator “to stick to the actual sequence of the events he or she has experienced and – based on the nature of the links between the events as experienced by the narrator – to progress from giving an account of event A to giving an account of event B” (ibid., p. 188). 2. The *obligation to give a shape* to the narrative impels the narrator “to complete the cognitive structures he or she has begun to present. The completion process involves the building up and completing by way of presentation of embedded cognitive structures, without which the overriding cognitive structures could not be completed” (ibid.). 3. The *obligation to provide relevance and density* impels the narrator “to give an account only of those events that are relevant as ‘central points’ for the narrative to be told. This implies an obligation to continuously assess individual events and situations in terms of the overall message of what is going to be narrated” (ibid.).

fore provides a profound insight into the layers of these experiences. According to Schütze, we can assume that there is a close connection between what is narrated and what was actually experienced here. Yet the experience is always embedded in the narrators' attitude and thus, in a sense, 'constructed'. It is therefore never 'reality' but always a narrated experience.

Unlike in his or her narratives, in the argumentative and evaluating parts of narrative interviews the respondent mainly takes account of the communicative situation and the conversational nature of the actual interview. This is because here, he or she explains and theorises about the motives and reasons behind his or her own action or makes an evaluative statement about them to the interviewer. Argumentations and evaluations are therefore "closely connected – in terms of content – to the interviewee's present point of view" (Schütze, 1987: 149).

The Documentary Method places into a meta-theoretical context the distinction between on the one hand the communicative statement about one's own or someone else's action (evaluation) or the explanation of the reasons and motives behind this action (argumentation) and on the other hand the narration and description of the experience of immediate courses of action and events:

The experience of a direct practice of action to be reconstructed in narratives and descriptions is embedded so deeply in this practice and in the respondents' relevant knowledge and foregone conclusions that they are unable to explicate it by way of communication but can only narrate or describe it. Such "atheoretical" (Mannheim, 1982: 67) and "conjunctive" knowledge (ibid: 203) is only disclosed to us if we either observe the practice directly or manage to gain access to it through narratives and descriptions (cf. Bohnsack/Nentwig-Gesemann/Nohl, 2007b: 14). Thus the narratives and descriptions in narrative interviews serve to identify the "atheoretical" and "conjunctive knowledge", which is as much embedded in the practice as it serves as a basis for it. Karl Mannheim himself has emphasised that the perspectivity of conjunctive knowledge is expressed particularly effectively in the "basic form of conveying things", i.e. in the "narration behind which the narrator stands" (1997: 192).

As shown in Section 4, we can differentiate between conjunctive knowledge embedded in the practice of action on the one hand and "communicative knowledge" (Mannheim, 1997) on the other. Communicative knowledge usually refers to the motives behind the action ('in-order-to' motives, as Alfred Schütz puts it) and "is based on reciprocal (...) presumptions of motives that are institutionalised, i.e. 'objectified', by society, and are articulated explicitly or 'literally'" (Bohnsack, 2007a: 60-1). In this respect, communicative knowledge mainly corresponds with the text genres of argumentation and evaluation. This is because argumentations and evaluations first and foremost refer to the motives and reasons behind sequences of action and

events that serve to make them seem plausible to the interviewer(s); in the evaluation phase, the respondent gives his or her views to the interviewer – mostly with reference to these motives and reasons. Since researchers and their subjects usually belong to different milieus, these explanations must refer to knowledge that is shared by society across the boundaries of those milieus. Such socially shared communicative knowledge is essentially abstract and therefore detached from the practice of action.

And so although it emanates from a different theoretical tradition, the differentiation of text genres Schütze proposes for evaluating narrative interviews can also be found in the Documentary Method, drawing a line between atheoretical conjunctive knowledge on the one hand and theoretical communicative knowledge on the other. However, it should be noted that the distinction between conjunctive and communicative knowledge is analytical; it is precisely the intermingling of narrative/description and argumentation/evaluation in the narrative interview that demonstrate that people always live on both levels of language (cf. Mannheim, 1997: 265).

In qualitative social research we are not so much interested in those communicative aspects of knowledge that are shared by and familiar to everybody anyway, as in unknown conjunctive knowledge. The interpretation of semantic content is therefore predominantly – but not exclusively – based on the conjunctive knowledge that is expressed in narratives and descriptions⁵.

5.2.2 Semantic Interpretation and Comparative Sequential Analysis

Whereas the formal level of interpretation, which focuses on the differentiation of text genres, relies heavily on narrative structure analysis, on the semantic level of interpretation it is the Documentary Method that primarily comes to bear. The formal distinction between argumentation, evaluation, description and narrative, as well as the focus on the latter, seeks to take account of the actors' experiences without being taken in by their subjective ascriptions of meaning. On the semantic level, too, the aim is to gain access to a reality that is neither defined as objective beyond the actors' knowledge

⁵ This, however, should not lead to the assumption that theoretical text genres are of no use to evaluation. Although it does not make sense to reconstruct argumentations and evaluations as that which they are supposed to be, i.e. as explanations of motives or reasons or opinions, argumentations and evaluations can be interpreted using the Documentary Method: rather than following their literal meaning, it is also possible to reconstruct the creation or construction method of the argumentations, thus working out *how* someone justifies or evaluates their actions. This *modus operandi* of theorising can also provide an insight into the orientation framework within which a person processes their topics and problems. In those interviews that are not dominated by narratives but tend to focus on argumentations and evaluations, it is sometimes a good idea to take more account of the conversational nature of the interview and to resort to the conversational analysis of the Documentary Method (cf. Bohnsack, 2007a: 121 ff), including its categories for describing the structure of discourse (proposition, elaboration, conclusion).

nor consists exclusively of the meaning they subjectively ascribe (which Karl Mannheim refers to as the “intentional expressive meaning”). In this context, the Documentary Method helps to overcome the dichotomisation between subjective and objective meaning (cf. Bohnsack, 2007a).

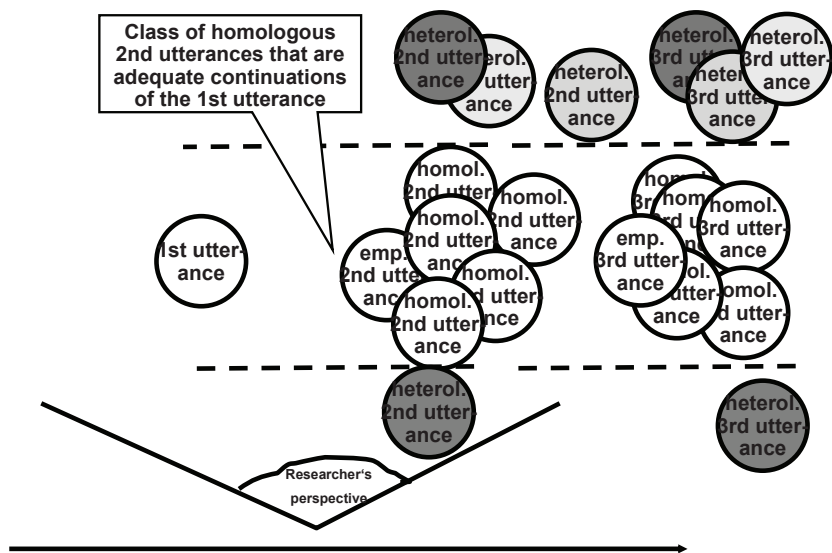
Although the actors’ knowledge continues to serve as the empirical basis of documentary interpretation, this basis becomes detached from the actors’ ascriptions of meaning. The precondition for this is the distinction already mentioned several times above between theoretical communicative knowledge on the one hand and implied atheoretical conjunctive knowledge on the other (cf. Mannheim, 1982). Documentary researchers therefore “do not assume that they know more than the actors, but that the latter themselves do not know what they really know, having an implicit knowledge that is not easily accessible to them by reflection” (Bohnsack/Nentwig-Gesemann/Nohl, 2007b: 11). Here the observer gains “access to the practice of action and its underlying (process) structure, which is outside the perspective of the actors themselves” (ibid: 12).

This, however, also implies a break with common sense. The question asked is not *what* the social reality is but *how* this reality is created. Reflecting interpretation seeks “to reconstruct and explicate the *framework* in which a topic is elaborated on, to establish *how*, i.e. with reference to (...) which frame of orientation the topic is dealt with” (Bohnsack, 2007a: 135; italics in original).

If the Documentary Method aims at analysing the implicit regularity of experiences and reconstructing the documentary meaning embedded in this regularity, i.e. the orientation framework of these experiences, this involves identifying continuities across a series of action sequences or narrative sequences about such actions.

The *comparative sequential analysis* already described briefly in Section 4 can now be applied directly to the analysis of narrative text sequences. If we assume that in a case a topic is experienced in one (and only one) particular way (i.e. within one framework of orientation), we can assume with regard to an individual topical section that a first narrative segment can only be followed by a specific second segment that corresponds to the way the topic is experienced, to the respective framework. It thus becomes possible to determine the documentary meaning, the way of dealing with the topic and the orientation framework in a triple step – the first segment, the second segment (continuation) and the third segment (ratification of the framework). If the continuation of the first segment corresponds to the homologous framework of the case, then we can expect this continuation to be ratified in the third segment (cf. Bohnsack, 2001).

In research practice, we regard the second segment as a given and adequate continuation of a first segment during interpretation and try to discover alternative versions for this second segment through brainstorming. The comprehensive class of all alternative second segments, which would be an appropriate, homologous continuation of the first segment and are equivalent to the given second segment, forms the homologous orientation framework. This framework becomes particularly evident if it can be distinguished from other non-equivalent, i.e. heterologous second and third segments, in other empirical cases:



I would like to explain this using a (fictitious) example: we analyse three interviews - A, B and C - in which middle-aged persons give an account of their first days of school. All three of them narrate the initial act using nearly the same utterances (“and then I started school” or something similar). The following table shows the different second utterances:

Case Narrative sequence	Interview A		

The implicit regularity that underlies the narrative sequence in interview B can be more easily recognised and validly identified by comparing it with the narrative sequences in interviews A and C. It becomes apparent, for example, that the narrative sequence in interview B is structured by an orientation towards (curricular) learning (despite the fact that these hopes were disappointed). This becomes particularly evident if compared with interview A, in which the interviewee focuses on his/her social relations in school, i.e. in an orientation framework of social relations. Although we find a similarly high relevance of social relations in interview C, here the orientation of the interviewee is towards family relations, against the background of which school becomes completely irrelevant.

5.3 Comparative Analysis

If the significance of a sequence of text segments, i.e. their regularity, which, as documentary meaning, constitutes the orientation framework, can only be identified by comparing it with other sequences of text segments in other empirical cases (cf. Bohnsack, 2001: 337f), then comparison mainly serves to permit and facilitate interpretation. It is also, however, a method for validating interpretations (see Nohl, 2007).

All interpretations are bound by horizons of comparison. When interpreting a single (initial) case, researchers analyse the text against the background of their own conceptions of normality, which are the result of experience, thought experiments, (common-sense) theories and/or past empirical research. In interview A, what should *normally* be the nature of the second and third utterances following the utterance “and then I started school”? The conceptions of normality developed (often only implicitly) regarding this question are based on the standpoint of the researchers (cf. Mannheim, 1985), who initially only notice those aspects of the interview that conform or are in conflict with their expectations of normality. There is a risk of immediately incorporating the unfamiliar case into what we regard as self-evident – even when all we notice about this case is that it is in conflict with our ideas.

Biased by the researcher's position, this interpretation can be methodically controlled and reflected by supplementing and possibly substituting the implicit comparative horizons not empirically verified in relevant empirical research with empirical comparative horizons (i.e. with other empirical cases).

At the beginning of comparative sequential analysis, the interviews are compared in terms of how the interviewees elaborate on the topic, i.e. in which (different) orientation frameworks they deal with the topic. The third part that structures the comparison, i.e. the *tertium comparationis*, is the topic of the initial utterance here.

5.4 Type Formation

In addition to serving validation purposes, comparative sequential analysis also serves to *generate multidimensional typologies* and thus to *generalise* empirical results (on the following, see also Bohnsack 2007a, Chapter 8, and 2007b). After all, the identification of different sequences of text segments in various cases and the reconstruction of their respective orientation frameworks should not happen by chance but be embedded in a systematic variation of cases and a resulting type formation. If we (initially) only use a subject-related *tertium comparationis* (e.g. the question of how the interviewees recount their first day at school) for comparative analysis, we can generate *sense-genetic types* from the reconstructed orientation frameworks (5.4.1). A complex comparative analysis, within which the *tertium comparationis* is varied (several times), is the precondition for *multidimensional sociogenetic type formation* (5.4.2).

5.4.1 Sensegenetic Type Formation

Up to this point, comparative sequential analysis has predominantly served to precisely reconstruct the sequential structure, i.e. the orientation framework (in which a topic is elaborated on), in an interview A in such a way that it was possible to clearly distinguish it from the orientation frameworks in interviews B, C and D. The contrasting orientation frameworks of interviews B, C, D, etc. were above all relevant as 'non-A' orientation frameworks. In sense-genetic type formation, the contrasting orientation frameworks now acquire a meaning of their own. That is to say, they are no longer regarded as 'non-A' but as B, C and D in their own right. The orientation frameworks thus reconstructed are *abstracted* (i.e. detached from the individual case) and formulated as types (A, B, C etc.)

Abstraction of the respective orientation frameworks and the resulting sense-genetic type formation can be made easier by taking other interviews

into account. Orientation framework A, which up to this point was only observed in interview A, can now be identified in interviews Y and X too and thus be detached from single case A. And orientation framework B – initially only visible in interview B – can now be identified in interviews S and T and thus be detached from individual case B; and so on and so forth.

Sense-genetic type formation shows how *different* the orientation frameworks are in which research subjects deal with topics and problems that are the focus of research. However, it cannot clarify in which social contexts and constellations these typified orientation frameworks exist. Sense-genetic type formation cannot, for example, shed light on how the way an educator deals with clients is connected with his/her professional experience. Nor can it identify how educational processes are linked with a specific age. It is sociogenetic type formation that deals with these questions concerning the social contexts and genesis of an orientation framework.

5.4.2 Sociogenetic Type Formation

In order to establish in what social context the orientation frameworks referring to different topics exist, the interpretation must not end with a comparison of how one topic is dealt with in two interviews, but must include further interview sections in which other topics are elaborated on and, most importantly, in which other orientation frameworks can be reconstructed. The benefit of empirical comparison increases with the degree of variation of the *tertia comparationis* applied.

However, in order to identify the connections between different orientation frameworks it is necessary to systematically change the *tertia comparationis* instead of varying them randomly. When doing so, it is important to precisely define the *tertium comparationis*. If the individual types can be distinguished clearly from each other due to the fact that they refer to different topics and problems, the *tertia comparationis* can easily be defined empirically. In that case, the *tertium comparationis* is the orientation framework within which in different cases a common topic is dealt with in the same way. However, if the individual types are developed from mutually overlapping topics and problems or even from the same sequence in the interviews, it becomes rather difficult to develop an empirical definition of the *tertia comparationis*. Initially only a tentative and provisional phrasing will be possible. Not until the examination is complete and all the types can be clearly distinguished from each other can a more accurate definition of the *tertia comparationis* be achieved.

In a study of spontaneous transformative processes (cf. Nohl, 2006, 2008), for example, narrative interviews were held with teenagers, adults aged about 35 and older people aged about 65. There I reconstructed transformative processes that began with a spontaneous act. Having given an

account of their spontaneously and newly established practices, all subjects spoke about how they had to fight to gain recognition (be it from their parents, state support agencies or on the market) for these new activities (e.g. doll-making, break dancing, working with a computer or playing in a music group), even within their own milieu but above all in public institutions.

This section of the narrative interview can be identified as a phase in the transformative process, i.e. as a “phase of proving oneself in society”, if we take as a reference dimension entire biographies and their transformative processes and compare this section with other sections of the transformative process. If, however, two different cases are drawn on, namely two cases that differ in terms of the narrator’s age, the reference dimension is also changed: it is no longer the biographical dimension that is the focus of the interpretation, but the dimension of age.

Although this comparison of two cases still demonstrates the efforts to gain recognition for a new practice outside the subject’s own milieu, i.e. in public institutions, differences emerge within this similarity between adolescents and middle-aged people: the latter clearly make efforts to gain positive recognition when dealing with social institutions, whereas adolescents may even be encouraged by a negative initial response by public institutions, e.g. criminalisation by the police.

As this example is meant to clarify, the formation of a type begins with the presence of a homologous orientation framework in each case (in this example, the phase of gaining recognition in society) that refers to the common characteristics of the cases within the phase sequence dimension in transformative processes. Against the background of these common features, other orientation frameworks then emerge (the significance of positive or negative responses by public institutions) in which both cases differ from each other. We can assume here that these contrasting orientation frameworks can be allocated to a second dimension of experience, i.e. that of age. This then requires further elaboration, e.g. by also including the older people in the sample.

Bohnsack (1989: 374) describes this approach as follows: the “contrast within similarity is a fundamental principle of the generation of individual types. It is also the connecting element that keeps an entire typology together”. Such contrasts in similarity can serve as the starting point of a multidimensional type formation. In the above-mentioned study on spontaneous transformative processes, these are the biographical dimension of the sequence of phases in transformative processes, the age-specific dimension of these transformations and – to a certain extent – their school-specific dimension. The choice of these dimensions for type formation is contingent and is based on the sample structure that allows precisely these comparisons. A systematic variation of gender, for example, would have permitted type formation in this dimension, too.

And so although the narrator of a biography (implicitly) has the duty on account of his or her narrative obligations to ensure that the narratives are homogenised and structured, it is possible in documentary interpretation to identify the heterogeneity and multidimensionality (i.e. the overlapping of different, e.g. phase-, age- and school-specific orientation frameworks) of the cases. This heterogeneity and plurality, this “coalescence of different objects as well as the existence of something identical pervading an entire range of differences” (Mannheim, 1952: 57), is the starting point of “sociogenetic type formation” in which not only the dissimilarity of orientation frameworks is elaborated on, but also an identification of the sociogenesis of these differences is attempted. “Sociogenetic type formation inquires for the experiential background against which the genesis of an orientation can be found” (Bohnsack, 2007b: 232). These experiential backgrounds or dimensions can only be identified if in one case – in contrast to other cases – not only a first type but also a second type and the overlapping of both types can be shown. This is possible, for example, where a section of a narrative interview can be interpreted as an indication both of a phase in the transformative process and of an age-specific experiential dimension.

In that in one case several types and their overlapping can be identified with the Documentary Method (in the systematic comparison with other cases), this method differs from the Grounded Theory approach as preferred by Schütze, Glaser and Strauss (see Section 3). This multidimensional type formation then continues with a generalisation of study results that equally deviates from the approaches of narrative structure analysis and Grounded Theory.

In the Documentary Method, generalisation mainly means the capacity of a type (e.g. the phases in a transformative process) to be generalised. This capacity to be generalised depends on the extent to which the overlapping of these types by other types (e.g. that of age) can be “proven and thus located within a typology” (Bohnsack, 2007b: 249). “A type formation capable of being generalised requires that it be confirmed in the overlapping or specification by other types and thus be made visible again and again in an increasingly contoured manner and on increasingly abstract levels” (ibid). Generalisation and specification are therefore interdependent. Generalisation is not possible unless it can be shown how type A is overlapped by type X, i.e. unless the limits of a type can be specified.

6. Final Remarks

As shown, the documentary interpretation of narrative interviews resorts on the one hand to certain elements, in particular the text genre analysis, of the method of analysis originally intended for this data collection method. On the

other hand, comparative analysis in the Documentary Method begins as early as the first (reflecting) interpretations and is then conducted via case comparison towards multidimensional type formation.

Documentary interpretation (through case reconstructions) thus not only allows for the individuality of experiential connections, may these refer to the entire biography or to individual sections of it (e.g. to profession). As those aspects of these experiential connections that are typical of age, social gender, academic qualifications or other collective experience dimensions are identified, the Documentary Method also permits the identification of the collective aspects of the biographies. In the biographies, individuality and collectivity are therefore not mutually exclusive but are closely linked with each other.

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